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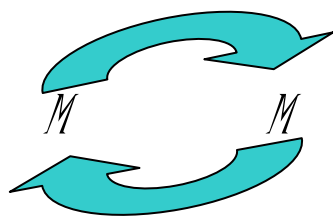
# *The OTTERS of CONSCIENCE-BERG*

*A Fantasy  
About Retrieval of Life Affirming Values*

*Written by Matthew R. Galvin, M.D.*

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*To Meg*



## Introduction to The Otters of Conscience-berg

A good story ought to be grounded in a bedrock of human values while bringing to light the tension that exists between competing values. Dr. Galvin's story does just that! The otters, with names so close to "ought", swimming in the stream of moral consciousness, mythically portray how survival demands that we acquire, not only manners, skills, and tools, but moral rules for living as well.

The natural struggle that occurs between parent and child (resulting in authority-derived values), sister and brother (resulting in peer-derived values), and individual struggles with adversity and meaning (resulting in self-determined values) are mythically and realistically portrayed in this story. The human artifacts that the otters find in the water—the valuational triangles necessary for holding up the bridges of Conscience-berg—symbolize the story's cohesive developmental theme. Early in development authority-derived values sustain one's moral journey; in adolescence peer-derived values come into prominence; and in older adolescence moral self-discovery and determination become part of a lifetime self-sustaining process.

Seeking moral rules for living is a transcultural phenomenon. In this story a Vietnamese father and son struggle over traditional moral authority; a native American "Dweller" struggles with moral isolation, and counter-culture youth struggle with connectedness to the larger community. And in the end, Otter and Notter struggle with the morality of sacrificing one's life for another.

Although this story has mythical elements, it is not whimsical. It is based on solid research regarding the development of moral valuation, one of five domains of conscience, as well as clinical and personal experiences of the author.

Barbara M. Stilwell

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# The Otters of Conscience-Berg

## Chapter One: A View from Under the Bridge

### *Kelp-sakes*

**Otter** and, her brother, '**Notter**', were going about the business of cracking abalone on their chests as they back-floated in the bay. They had plucked the abalone from nearby kelp beds. Any other time they might have tarried among the luxurious kelp, taking their leisure on invisible glide-paths known only to them, through underwater forests swaying hypnotically in the tidal currents.

Not this time. For these abalone promised to be especially succulent, and the otter pair could hardly keep from smacking their lips in anticipation of gustatory delights. True, lip smacking is not very mannerly at the family table. However, table manners are not rigorously upheld in the otter community. For example, it is entirely permissible for an otter to use her paws in order to eat. After all, the bay in which an otter sups is always ready at hand to serve as one huge finger bowl if a paw should become greasy.

On the other hand, it is generally recognized among otters that, in order to attain a meaty reward, one does require *practical skill*, and a *tool*, if not manners. The *practical skill* is *dexterity*. Dexterity for an otter means tapping-and not dropping anything, while back floating at the same time--really, no mean feat to accomplish. **Otter** considered it an added plus if she could keep water out of her nose. Then there is the *tool*. The *tool* is a carefully selected rock, polished from long use and carrying the distinctive imprint of its owner. **Otter** and '**Notter**' came to their dining spot properly equipped. Each began in earnest tap-tap-tapping the hard abalone shell on a personalized rock securely lodged between chest and belly.

There are other things besides manners, skills, and tools important in the lives of the otters in this story. That is because the

otters in this story live in the streams of Moral Consciousness. And, because they live in these waters, they are apt to encounter, almost every day, *do's* and *don'ts*, *should's* and *shouldn'ts* that have to do with things at least as important as manners and skills and tools.

The *do's* and *don'ts* found in the streams of Moral Consciousness are *oughts* and *ought not's*. When one comes upon an *ought* (or an *ought not*) it signifies there's something behind it and something in front of it. Behind an *ought* (or an *ought not*) is something of **Moral Value**--which is another way to say 'moral importance'. In front is something called **Virtue**. Think about an otter swimming on the surface of a canal's still water. The value is like the sleek body of the creature propelled along by energy inside it. The virtue is how it plies the water in front, how it must navigate.

The moral values behind each *ought* (or *ought not*) can often be discovered by careful examination of the **Very Best Reasons** for going along with what the *ought* says to do (or what the *ought not* says to avoid doing). Just how to go about making sure that it is the Very Best among all of a person's possible reasons must wait until later in this story to be told. If the Very Best Reason is strong enough it can move the person who has it to follow the *ought* or *ought not*. Then, because it moves the person, it has become a **Motive**. Very Best Reasons that aren't quite strong enough by themselves to move a person are weak motives. Sometimes, there are motives behind an *ought* (or an *ought not*) that are really very, very strong but are not the Very Best Reasons for doing something. Sometimes the motive is not a good enough or even a fair-to-middling sort of reason. In fact, the motive may not be any sort of reason at all.

Reasons are things a person can give to others when asked to tell them. But many motives spring from streams that flow underground, beneath the streams of consciousness where reasons are to be found. These motives often come upon a person unawares. They can't be told about because the person doesn't

know they are there. Sometimes, however, the person *has learned* that powerful currents are at work somewhere deep inside. Such a person may allow the Very Best Reason to be carried along by these powerful currents. Maybe the Very Best Reason will add to the push and pull the truly strong motives exert, but it has the weaker power.

Strong motives that are not reasons are not necessarily bad. They are often *basic* to a person's nature. They are **Base Motives**. Even knowing they are not especially bad motives, a person still might wish to do what ought to be done for the sake of Very Best Reasons instead of Base Motives. Such a person would like the Very Best Reasons to be the strongest motives of all, but knows they cannot be the strongest just by saying so. Such a person has recognized a **Value-Motive Gap** in the stream of moral consciousness. This person may be caught in the eddies that are caused by Value–Motive Gaps, and may be swung about losing all sense of direction. Eventually, such a person may want to do something about it.

If such a person works hard to narrow the gap so that the Very Best Reasons become closer and closer to being the strongest motives, the person has become a **Person of Conscience**. Virtues are the best ways that can be learned by a Person of Conscience to put the moral values into practice. Sometimes, however, virtue has not been tested until the Very Best Reason for doing something stands alone without the power of any Base Motives on its side. Sometimes circumstances may be even grimmer in that all manner of Base Motives may be arrayed against a very solitary Very Best Reason.

So, in regards to our otter pair, which virtues are concerned? Well, there are several candidates to be considered. The effort it takes to crack an abalone shell makes *patience* one. However, it is not the only one.





## *Entitlements*



The female, who was older, preferred 'Otter' to her given name 'Otterina' which she considered to be "too frou-frou". The male's given name was 'Ot-notter'. He fancied it conveyed a dignified impression.

Dignity, however, was something he was seldom permitted in the presence of his sister. In the matter of how he was to be called by other otters, his older sister accomplished a transformation early in their life together by simple repetition of the pet name she had created for him. In time, even Mom was apt to call him 'Notter'.

Mom was Dorothea Otter. Her folk were River Otters. Not very formal, Mom insisted her friends call her Dotty. So she had no real difficulty introducing her son by the pet name, 'Notter'. Their Dad, Otello the Third, was a tougher shell for Otterina to crack. He came from a long line of distinguished Sea Otters. He was all about preserving dignity and the orderly transmission of family values across the generations. A family legend had it that in Otello's direct lineage was the very otter who inspired the small image on the Chi-Ro page of the ancient, illuminated texts comprising the famed **Book of Kelps**. Indeed, Otello often quipped that his heritage was not only illustrious but also illustrated.

It had been difficult in the first place for Dotty to prevail upon Otello the Third to end the venerable succession at three and to allow an alternative selection, like Ot-notter, from the list of family names. To his credit, Otello steadfastly resisted the use of



'Notter for a number of early chapters in the Otter Family Romance. In subsequent chapters, however, Otterina and Ot-notter became, at about the same time but not to the same degree, more mobilized and in need of redirection. The ease of pronouncing two syllables instead of three had much in its favor when Dad went upstream or downstream to locate and/or correct his son and daughter. "'Notter" and "Otter" it became for all but the most formal occasions.

The most enduring effect of Ot-notter's name-change, however, was not Otello's heightened peevishness at the lack of decorum threatening to run rampant in his family. This was, in any event, short-lived as Father Otter was ever more obliged to attend to antics ever more novel from the otter pair. Nor was it 'Notter's vexation. While it can safely be said he never cherished the familiar -and presumably fond- diminutive, 'Notter did in time accommodate to it. No, the most lasting effect of the name change was the sense of power and entitlement that success in altering her brother's name bestowed upon his sister, Otterina. After this early triumph, there was no stopping her. She assumed Ot-notter would always be the clay she was meant to fashion.



## *The Mists of Abalone*

It was a shame they had not even begun their first course of abalone when there was a commotion from the Bridge above them. At first, Otter and 'Notter refused to give the noise above them notice. They were used to commotion on the Bridge. It was after all an eldritch place. And, in keeping with its enchanted character, during a commotion on the Bridge, it always happened that a fog rolled in from across the bay so that nothing whatsoever could be seen.

“Thick as kelp soup”, said Otter of the fog.

“So thick you can’t even see your paw in front of your face”,

'Notter agreed. They went back to tapping.

Ker-r-r-plunk. Something fell from out of the fog into the water between them. Plosh and ker-r-r-plash! Something else plunged down near 'Notter’s ear. “ Hey,” he shouted in alarm.

“Look –out.”

They looked up towards the Bridge.

“That was close,” said Otter. “Sometimes

I think that the Bridge of Otter-worth is just too dangerous to be under.”

“Father says it’s the Bridge of Other- worth—not Otter-worth.” 'Notter offered with a touch too much temerity.

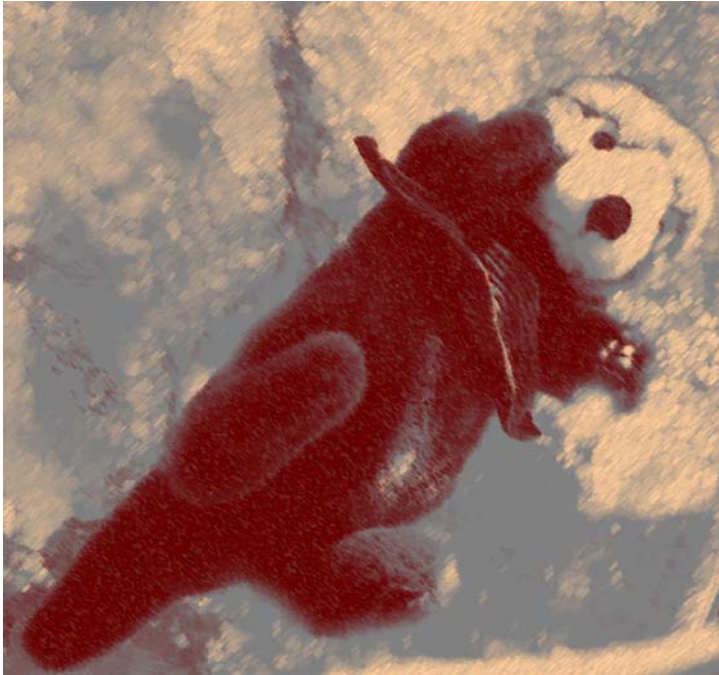
It was a never-ending dispute between them: what to call the bridge that spanned like a dream above their heads.

Some said that it was first named (named, but not built –no one knew who built it) by French voyageurs and fur-traders. Had they been more reflective, the otter pair would have shuddered to think whose furs might have been trapped and traded.

Still, Otterina might not be entirely dismayed to learn she would have been prized chiefly for her glossy coat. She struggled with vanity at times. Voyageur or fur-trader, someone dubbed it *Pont de l' Autre*.

Otterina might easily have defended her insistence upon designating the bridge Otter-worth not only because of the semblance in sound across languages but also because within the French language, the word for otter is *loutre*. However Otterina was not the linguistic scholar she might have been with more consistent application and so she missed this subtlety. The bridge was one of seven that could be found connecting Conscience-Berg to the mainland surrounding the bay and the confluence of rivers that emptied into it. Like each of the bridges, the Bridge of Other-worth had its unique aspect or property —or, as the otters thought privately, its own special kind of weirdness.

“O.K. Otter, shall we see what has come down?” Ot-Notter now seemed positively eager.



"You go ahead, 'Notter and I will hold your abalone."

'Notter gave his abalone into his sister's keeping. If he gave any thought that it might not be entirely *safe*keeping, his demeanor did not reflect it. He dived into the currents of the water below the

Bridge, searching in circles amid a swirl of his own bubbles for the mysterious object that had been cast into the depths.

Otter thought to herself while nibbling on her brother's abalone: "Many an otter would consider it an honor to retrieve these human artifacts. Many would envy me my task." Otter's father had told her: " Daughter Otter, there is nothing so rewarding as participating in this tradition."

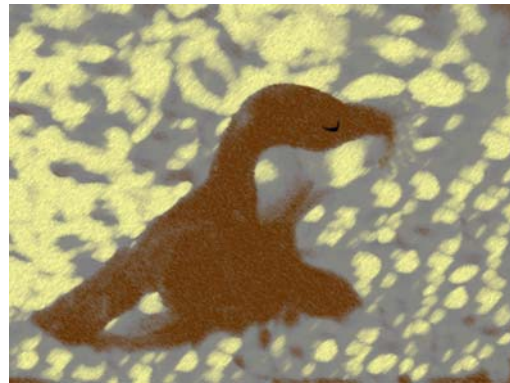
Otterina and her brother were introduced to fetching these things by their parents, at first as if there was a game involved. Long ago, they taught the otter pair to follow the objects to the bottom of the bay, to intercept them before they settled there, or failing that, to dredge them up. After retrieving them, the next step was to find out how each object figured in the commotion up on the Bridge. One thing that made the game especially exciting and worth the effort of playing was keeping the objects out of reach of the Undertoad. The Undertoad was a denizen of the deep that sometimes laired nearby. He often concealed himself in the many value-motive gaps that lay concealed on the silt-covered bottom. In the old days, he was often intent upon snatching away the otter's prizes or even-if so inclined- the otters themselves. However, over time the Undertoad had seemingly lost interest in the clever pair who always seemed to foil his schemes and escape his snares.

"It is true service," her mother had added.

"True service—hmm," Otter wasn't so sure --a meal had, after all, been interrupted and, if the search took too long, might have to be foregone altogether. "Anyway, who is it being served? And did they deserve being served?"

"Not to fret," she murmured as she chewed thoughtfully on the abalone. "Under my guidance, 'Notter has become tolerably good at retrieving objects that fall from the bridge. Not so expert as me, of course: he still needs a lot of work. But this is good practice. Let him have this one...and maybe the next one too. Hmm, whose abalone am I eating now? Oh I don't suppose it really matters."

Otter turned lazily in the water. She thought about the objects 'Notter would salvage from the depths. "What will it be this time?" she wondered. She assumed it would be nothing good to eat like abalone. Objects from the Bridge usually did not smell like food.





She supposed that it would be most like a rock, a tool-, but such a tool as the humans might use.

'Notter emerged with an object that trailed leafy tendrils of golden kelp still connected at the bottom of the bay by their holdfasts. Otter cultivated her impatience as her brother meticulously disengaged the shiny object from the strands while trying not to damage the plant life.

Before her brother was quite done, Otter had exceeded the limits of her patience. She said simply in a tone that would not brook dissent, "Let me see."

'Notter handed it to her with no overt demonstration of possessiveness. She grabbed the object, then composed herself before examining it with studied nonchalance.

"What do you think it is?" 'Notter asked, scratching his head.

"Don't be in such a hurry to know everything, 'Notter. You're acting just like an eager beaver." Otterina adopted her most effectively scornful tone.

'Notter was suitably chastised, "Sorry," he said.

'Notter admired his sister Otterina terribly. He craved her approval as much as abalone. Unfortunately, Otterina's approval was in shorter supply than abalone at almost any time. So instead, 'Notter often made do with his sister's evident interest in improving his character. He accepted her criticisms as tokens of her affection and esteem. Adopting this measure of affiliative tendencies--one could only be astonished by the strength of their bond. She was pleased to see he handed it to her without a fuss.



"What is it?" Otterina mused before she quite remembered the admonition she had just that moment directed at 'Notter.

"It's a pointy thing," 'Notter opined.

"It could be what humans use to break open abalone shells."

"But--

"But what?"

"Well, what if humans don't have to put abalone shells on their chests to break them open?"

"Nonsense, 'Notter. How else would they do it?"

"You do know, don't you, you should always point sharp objects away from your body."

"I guess so. You are right about that, Otter."

"And what is one very good reason for you to follow that rule?"

"So I won't accidentally stab or poke myself? But this object is pointy all around. How could I point it away from my body? Even if one thing sharp is pointed away, another sharp part is not-- it either points back or to the side."

Otter turned the object this way and that, satisfying herself that what 'Notter suspected about the object might indeed be true. "Never mind about that. What if you tried to poke a hole in the abalone shell with this pointy thing and you slipped?"

"Oh, I hadn't thought of that. That could hurt."

"You could even stab yourself in the heart--"

"Oh. I--"

"--and die," Otterina declared. She had a flair for the dramatic. "What if you put your head through it?"

'Notter did so. Otter was delighted with the result: "There, you see?"

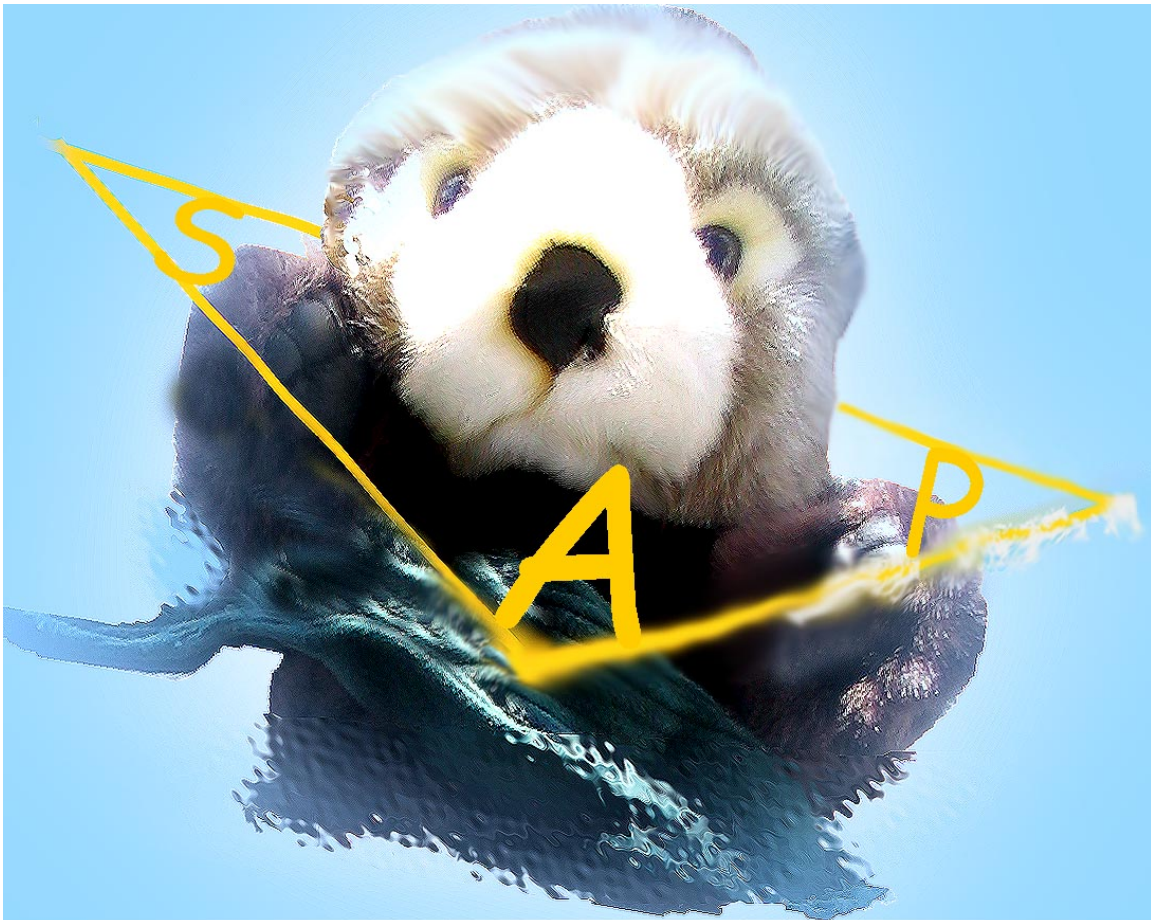
"Yes...I do see, yes, but --?"

"But what?"

“Now I am afraid I will impale anyone else I might encounter.”

“I see your point—I mean points. Well, then you must be extraordinarily careful. Perhaps you could give a little yelp every so often to ward persons out of harm’s way?”

“A yelp? Well I suppose it can be managed every once in awhile.”



With a new perspective from the inside looking out, 'Notter returned his attention to the mysterious object. "Hmm. It's all elbows outside and crooks-of-the arm inside. Otter, maybe it's meant to hold something. Maybe it's a kind of trap."

That thought worried Otter. Since trapping was long ago forbidden among humans who inhabit Conscience-Berg, she and her brother had not acquired much familiarity with artificial traps

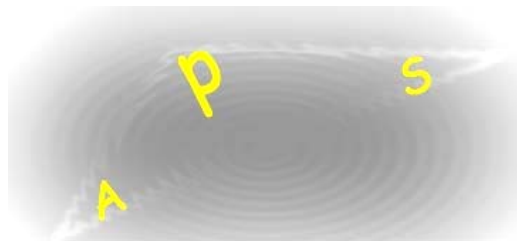


and snares. Of course, there had always been the Undertoad, who tried to catch them for who knows what nefarious purposes. But the Undertoad was not technologically sophisticated in the least. It relied solely on sneaky behavior, a lunge (which would be deadly if it weren't always signaled in advance by the Undertoad's habit of arching its brows) and a greedy grasp that so far anyway (and fortunately for the otters) came back empty-handed. However, the folklore passed down by the elder otters abounded with descriptions of predators far more vicious and far less inept: teeth-in-jaws-without-bodies, laying concealed and snapping closed with bone crushing power once and only once. Unspeakably cruel, those teeth-in-jaws-without-bodies, of which the oldsters told, had no visible sinew to hold the hapless prey. It would be a little like an Otter holding an abalone in its teeth until it was quite lifeless and then spitting it out. A little bit like that-- only far, far worse.

The teeth-in-jaws-without-bodies had no eyes that fixed a ravenous gaze, no hot and steamy breath that enveloped and basted, no slaverling drool, no tongue that flicked out and tasted, no gullet set in motion with anticipation, no stomach that growled nor entrails that rumbled. They made no meal at all. They crushed and held but did not deign to devour.

“On second thought I think you should not stick your head into the pointy thing,” declared Otter.

Something else smacked the surface--this time between them. Otter looked at the point where the object entered the water, then looked at ‘Notter. A slight nod from her was all it took. He made a neat s-curved backwards dive and went after it.



“It is the same thing!” exclaimed ‘Notter as he broke the surface and showed his sister the salvaged prize.

“Perhaps only nearly the same thing,” Otter corrected her brother. “I see a difference.” She added with a hint of exultation, “A just noticeable difference.”

“Show me the difference,” ‘Notter insisted. Otter showed her brother how the angle marked ‘A’ was largest in the first triangle but the angle marked ‘P’ was largest in the second triangle.

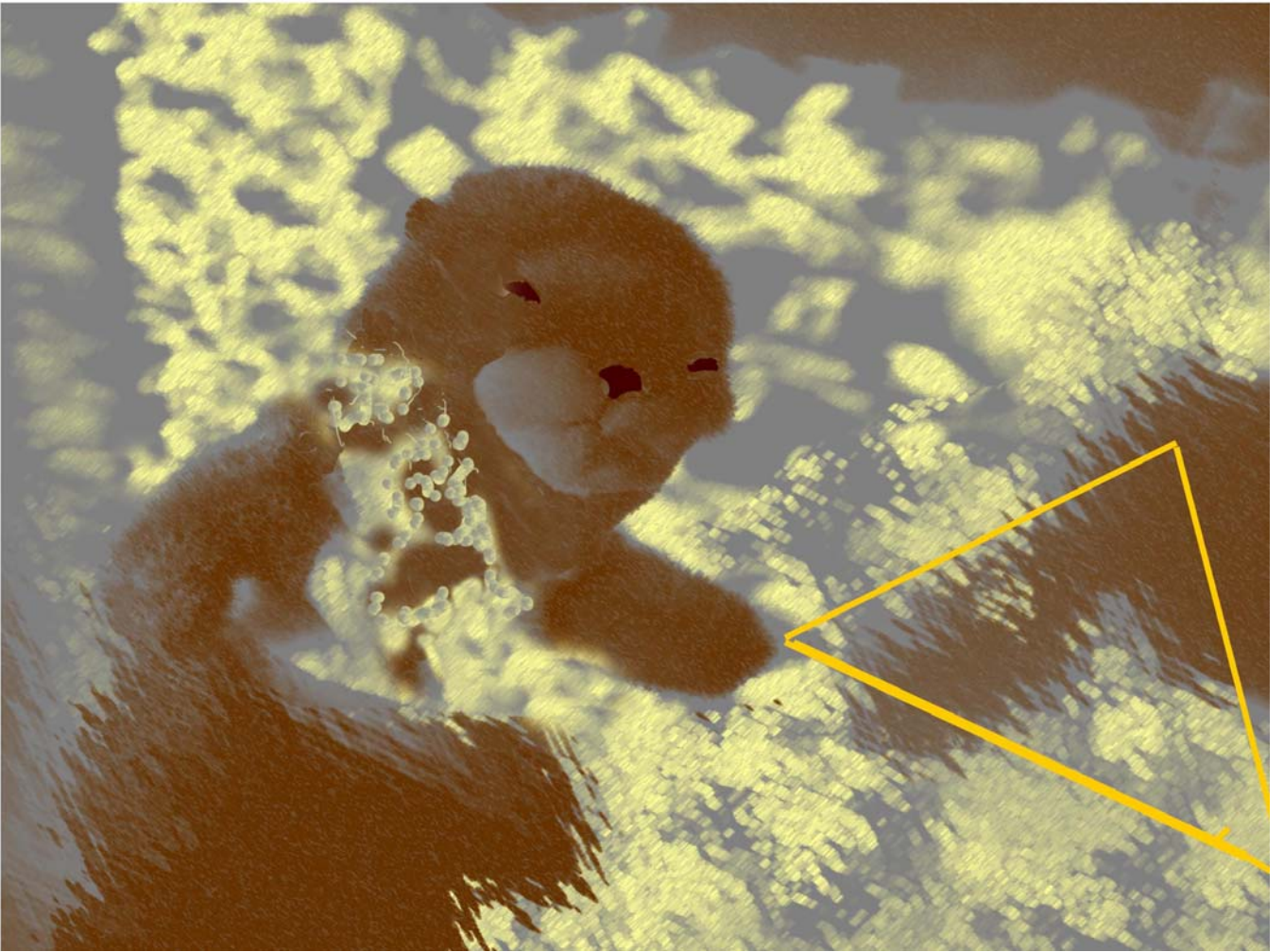
A whirring sound, something like a boomerang might make, just above their heads was followed closely by a third splash, this time behind them.



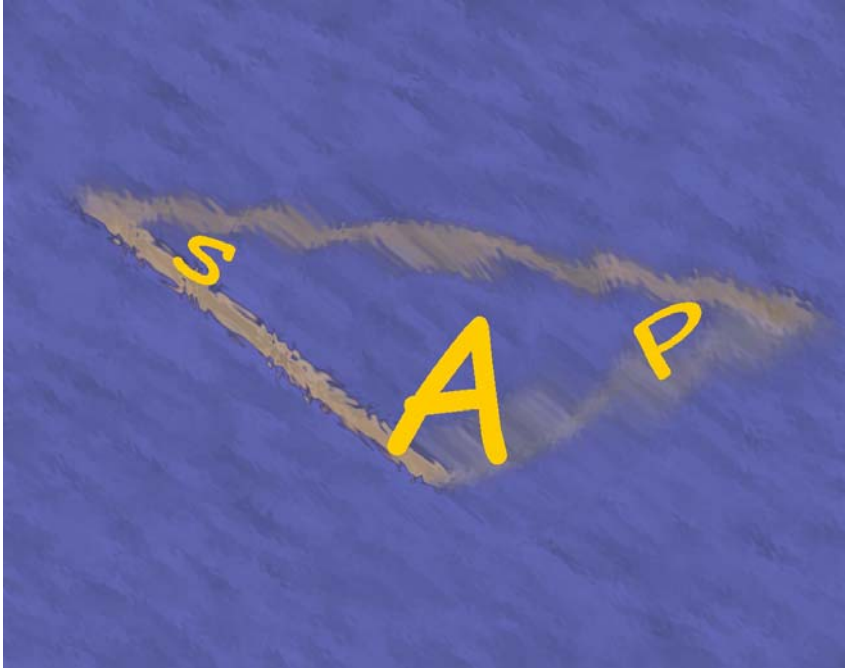
“I will go this time,” Otter indicated. “Hold onto these while I make my dive.” She handed ‘Notter the two triangles already in their keeping. In spite of her hurry to retrieve it, the artifact settled in the kelp bed and required a search effort. Once it was located, she had to carefully dislodge a sea snail that was traversing it. The sea snail in question was of the

species *Aplysia californica*, which ever since Kandel’s seminal studies on the neurobiological changes associated with aversive learning in this little creature, had become revered in Conscience-Berg, and could not in any way be subjected to harm. When she returned to the surface she had the third.

“Hmm,” Otter mused. “What does it mean?”



## Chapter Two: The First Value Triangle



### *Cross-cultural cross-purposes*

Le Van Xuan was one of the kids from Conscience-Berg. He lived near The Bridge of Elder-worth. Sometimes he thought he was holding up the bridge of Elder-worth all by himself—solely to please the elders in his family. The meaning behind Xuan’s thought was that he felt very, very burdened by his elders’ expectations. It wasn’t as though there were a lot of elders he had to please. There were only two Xuan had ever known. And so far as elders went, Xuan’s elders were really still quite young. They were his mother and father who had fled their country at the end of a long war and made their way to other lands, eventually to Conscience-Berg. Xuan’s elders had been among “the boat-people” who fled from their country in fear of reprisal and fear of repression from the victors in the war. The boat-people left their shores in vessels that were hardly worthy to be on a river, let alone the high seas. Many boat-people did not survive. Many who did survive were refused entry to neighboring countries and forced to return to their country of origin to face the new authorities they had so dreaded. Many others were not forced to return but spent years



in refugee camps. The fortunate ones among the boat-people were picked up by commercial fishing boats or merchant marine ships and taken away, that is if they had sufficient funds to pay for their passage. Dehydrated, weakened from inanition and badly burned by the sun, Xuan's parents considered themselves among the most fortunate. They had not had sufficient funds to pay for their passage. However, the crewmembers of the ship they encountered were sympathetic to them and offered protection. Xuan's parents had nothing when they finally arrived in the camp for displaced persons. It was some time before they learned the basic language of their host country. His father's knowledge of carpentry and furniture making did not serve the immediate purpose of helping them to earn their living. They were full of courage and resolve, however, and gradually overcame the obstacles facing them. Xuan's father took work as custodial staff at a hospital at night and at the school where Xuan's mother worked in the kitchen during the day. When Xuan was born he was their hope for a new future. For him, they wanted the best possible education and sacrificed accordingly. Xuan loved and admired his parents. He shared many of their values. He valued how they had sacrificed for him and his younger sisters. He did not, however, value learning in school so much as his parents did. It wasn't that he didn't value learning at all. In some of the countries where his family had lived, school had not been an especially joyous experience for Xuan. He did not make friends easily and did not participate in after school activities. Besides, he wanted to learn to be a master craftsman, a maker of fine wood furniture like his father had been before leaving his war-torn country. Once, Xuan had come upon pictures of his father's work. There weren't many. Xuan's mother had gathered them hastily, chary of detection by her husband who would have raised objections. She put them in a plastic bag and concealed them on her person just before she said good-bye to their home. By the time Xuan saw them, they were dog-eared, faded and torn, and splotched. In spite of his mother's efforts to protect them, they had not quite escaped being marred by water

from the sea. Yet through the ravages of age and elements, to Xuan they conveyed images of strong, dependable, handsome, well-contoured pieces. Chairs with wonderful curving backs and armrests in deep, dark hues, a round table with an intaglio of carved *hoa dao* or peach blossoms. He could imagine running his hands across them, appreciating their excellence and the love gone into them. He would have liked it best of all if his father had ever agreed to teach him such skills as these beautiful creations demanded. Xuan's mother also worked in wood. Unlike his father she still practiced her craft, which now she called "only a hobby." For Xuan she had carved a figure she called a *Buddha-en-bois*, "like your grandfather, my father, would make. Your grandfather would not make the Buddha-en-bois to be sold in the shops. For the shops he carved animal and human figures and wooden knives. For the street vendors, he carved sticks to sell to the soldiers. Soldiers called them 'short-timer' sticks. The soldiers bought them when it was near the time they could return to their homes in their own country. They waved them at each other whenever they passed on the street: 'I'm this short,' one would say. Another would hold up his stick, show a new notch and say, 'I'm even shorter. I'm tee-tee short.'"

Xuan asked, "Mom, do you want a short-timer stick, too?"

"Why would I want one?" she was surprised at Xuan's question.

"So you will know when it is near the time to go home," Xuan responded.

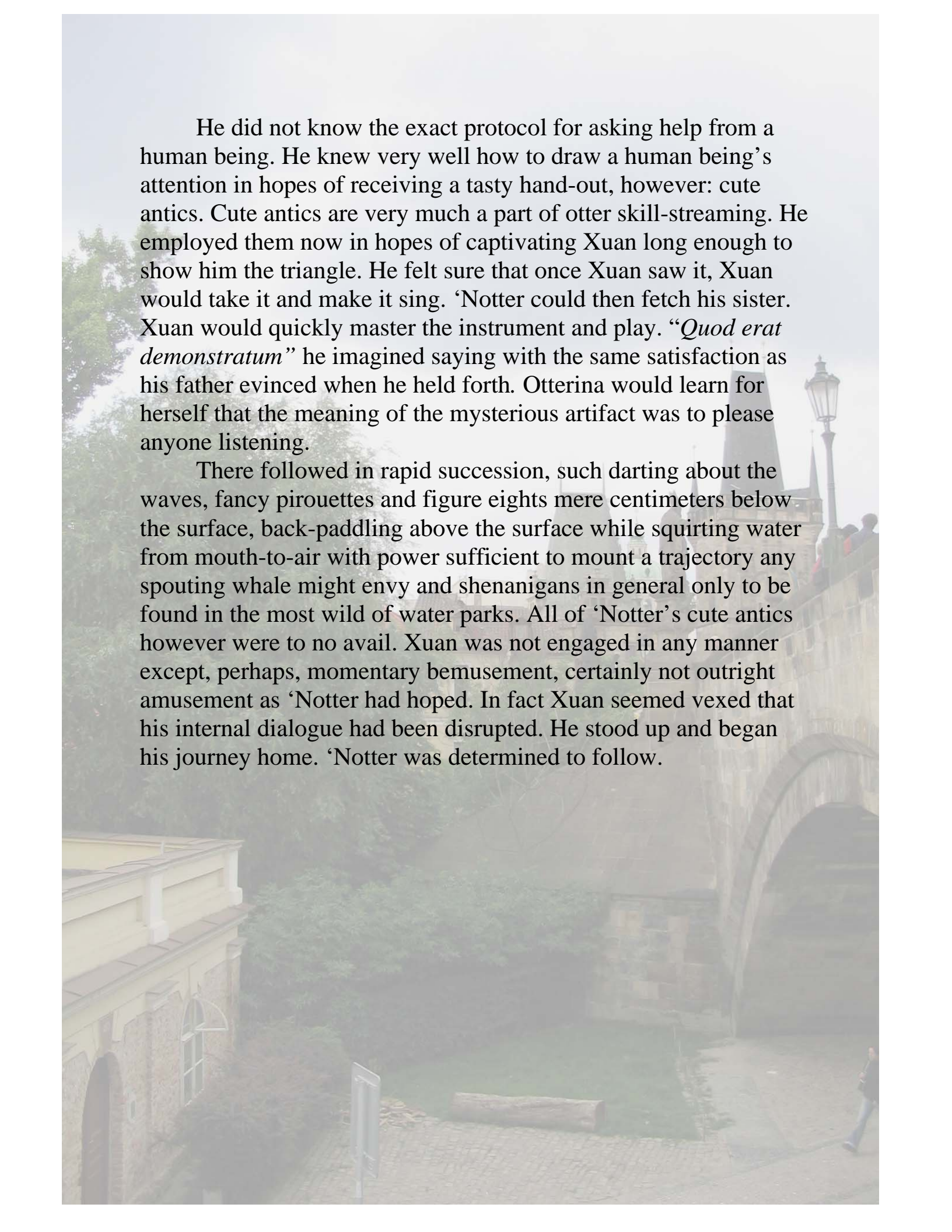
But throughout Xuan's childhood, there was no talk of going back to the old country, especially in front of his father. His father would not allow it. And his father also discouraged talk about working with wood. "When you are a physician, Xuan, you will buy whatever furniture you require for your office."

Xuan was not the first person ‘Notter espied on the walkway that melded with the various quays and vantage points, emerged again to run atop the levees along the bay and dipped down to pass beneath the bridge. Xuan also was not entirely a stranger. ‘Notter had encountered him, solitary, on another occasion, by the water. At the time, Xuan was playing a homemade stringed instrument called a *dan ty-ba* that his mother had made for him. The sounds Xuan made were at first strange to an otter’s ears but by and by became quite pleasing.

Just why he chose Xuan he probably could not have said. Certainly ‘Notter had learned from many, many experiences to anticipate he would be held accountable for his choice—as he was for all his choices-- by his sister. However, special importance attached to his choice in this case. The charge to him from Otterina had been made in no uncertain terms. He was to find out the meaning of the first pointy thing retrieved from the depths of the bay, the one with the large ‘A’ and the smaller ‘s’ and ‘p’ marking its corners. She would conduct a similar investigation with respect to the second one and they would confer about the third. In response to his sister’s demands, ‘Notter had examined the object more closely. “The pointy part marked ‘A’ is an especially fat pointy part compared to the others,” he had mused. If ‘Notter had been more advanced in his studies of geometry he might have said a greater number of degrees had been apportioned to the angle ‘A.’ In the process of scrutinizing it, he happened to drop it. It rang out as it struck the ground. At first the resonance sounded strange to the otter’s ears but then rather pleasing.

‘Notter remembered the *dan ty ba* that Xuan had played. The *dan ty ba* did not look anything like the mysterious object. The *dan ty ba* was actually pear-shaped. It didn’t really sound the same. But it startled, arrested and then pleased his ear in much the same way. So ‘Notter had decided to enlist Xuan’s help to learn the meaning of the fallen triangle.





He did not know the exact protocol for asking help from a human being. He knew very well how to draw a human being's attention in hopes of receiving a tasty hand-out, however: cute antics. Cute antics are very much a part of otter skill-streaming. He employed them now in hopes of captivating Xuan long enough to show him the triangle. He felt sure that once Xuan saw it, Xuan would take it and make it sing. 'Notter could then fetch his sister. Xuan would quickly master the instrument and play. "*Quod erat demonstratum*" he imagined saying with the same satisfaction as his father evinced when he held forth. Otterina would learn for herself that the meaning of the mysterious artifact was to please anyone listening.

There followed in rapid succession, such darting about the waves, fancy pirouettes and figure eights mere centimeters below the surface, back-paddling above the surface while squirting water from mouth-to-air with power sufficient to mount a trajectory any spouting whale might envy and shenanigans in general only to be found in the most wild of water parks. All of 'Notter's cute antics however were to no avail. Xuan was not engaged in any manner except, perhaps, momentary bemusement, certainly not outright amusement as 'Notter had hoped. In fact Xuan seemed vexed that his internal dialogue had been disrupted. He stood up and began his journey home. 'Notter was determined to follow.

Xuan took a route into Conscience-berg unfamiliar to 'Notter, although much of the way ran parallel to canals fed by hot springs. 'Notter was glad of the steamy mists that veiled his progress. He imagined that the triangle he had stuck his head through and now carried around his neck gave him a most formidable appearance—the appearance of an otter with whom no one would be disposed to trifle.



Along the way, he was also not averse to indulging an extraordinary thrill the like of which he thought might come only to someone stalking his prey.

At length, Xuan arrived at his home. 'Notter searched about for a vantage point from which he could peer into a window. Some boxes in an alley way served admirably for climbing and he was able, with a modest leap, able to make a purchase on a narrow ledge that ran round about the front façade. He located the window that afforded a good enough view of the family scene unfolding

while ensuring he would present only a very low profile to passers-by.

Xuan's parents had been waiting. His father, Hieu, had a crumpled paper in his fist and was pacing the room. His mother, Han, sat at a small table, her hands folded quietly in her lap.

'Notter could not tell how much time had passed but he could make out from their faces that it did not pass in tranquility. Their faces registered surprise and anger and sadness and disgust and fear, not in synchrony with one another and not evinced with equal frequency and intensity by all the persons present. Eventually, 'Notter decided the expressed emotionality had attained the right pitch. He surveyed the ancient façade and mapped the way he would ascend to a window ledge just above the ornamental cornice, which in turn was directly above the front door. Upon executing his change of position, he removed the triangle from around his neck and held it high overhead for a moment. The scene might have been described as highly dramatic had there been anyone to watch and had he not been rather shy of ever drawing himself up into his most imposing stature. As it happened, 'Notter dropped the triangle down in front of him without much ado. It emitted a small sound. 'Notter distinctly heard three voices beyond the wall say, nearly in unison, "What's that?" However, they apparently did not find the sound sufficiently compelling to come outdoors and ascertain its origin. 'Notter peered over the ledge. His disappointment was visible, both in his face and in his posture. The triangle had fallen only a few feet and tottered precariously upon the edge of the cornice. Not unlike a golfer whose putt had pushed the ball to the very lip of the cup, 'Notter waited to see what would happen as a natural consequence of gravity. Nothing did. He tried to assist the triangle on its downward journey by stomping on the window ledge—to no avail. He sighed and made his descent headfirst down the wall toward the cornice, as he had seen squirrels do with alacrity on trees. 'Notter could not match the squirrel in this technical feat, lost his purchase and plummeted down with a yelp. He did however dislodge the triangle. The

triangle struck the ground about the same time as ‘Notter did but with a richly resonant sound much more satisfying to his ear than the thud he himself made. “So the pointy thing is not solid but hollow like a reed,” ‘Notter concluded before he lost consciousness.

### ***The Mount Moriah motif***

“At first I thought my family had been visited by a \_\_\_\_” the word she used resembled *ling-mao*, with meaningful inflections that were not captured in ‘Notter’s register of different sounds. Han spoke in a soft voice. She was referring to an ill-favored apparition that might be seen over someone’s grave. Of course, ‘Notter was not in any condition to appreciate her allusion. While sensitive to cultural diversity and a great lover of lore (both attributes he had in common with his seafaring father), he had not the command of many languages. Moreover, he probably had sustained at least a mild concussion. “Now I see only a little otter who is far from the river. I hope you are not hurt or ill.”

The soothing voice coaxed him out of his insensibility. Mercifully he was neither badly hurt by his fall nor even disoriented for very long. “What is she holding out to me,” he wondered as he sniffed.

“Try this fish pâté, little otter. I think you will be pleased.”

‘Notter was actually very pleased. He had not gauged how hungry he had become on the journey following Xuan. “Where is the young man? And the older one... Where is the pointy thing?” He was immediately alert.

As if in response to the otter’s alarmed but unspoken inquiries (and who can say whether or not it was simply musing for her own purposes), Han narrated aloud the events of the evening. Fortunately for ‘Notter, Han spoke in her most recently adopted language, the same he was most accustomed to hearing from the humans in Conscience-Berg.

“ Little visitor, first you must know my husband, Hieu, is a very good man but unyielding as the mountain cliffs of my country

that refuse to incline their heads to the sea. And Xuan too is good—but headstrong as a monsoon in the spring. How they clash and clamor in their love for one another. They clash so loudly the sacred sound could scarcely be heard over their din, though it was made at our own threshold. They could easily have missed the blessing bestowed upon our home. Still, it was loud enough to stop their quarrel. A double blessing. Xuan was first to recognize what had fallen, ‘A triangle from Elder-Worth,’ he said in awe. I have not seen him so amazed since the time he first saw the aurora, and thought the night sky was burning with cold fire.”

Up until then, Han had made no move to touch the otter, nibbling still at the fish paste but now trembling all over as he looked up and gauged the actual distance of his fall. She allowed him to sniff her hand then stroked his back.

“But it was my husband who picked it up and wrapped it in linen for the journey to Elder-Worth. He told Xuan it was for him alone to take it where it belonged, to replace it so the bridge can sing once more. At first, he forbade Xuan from accompanying him.... He said because Xuan did not respect his father, he must not come. I knew that was Hieu’s anger and his need to control that spoke first. Hieu left then for the High Bridge of Elder-Worth and would have left without provisions had I not insisted upon preparing a backpack. And Xuan was in anguish. I did not know what to do. I blessed my son. Then I sent Xuan to follow his father and make amends before returning. The very next moment I came upon you so near my door.”

There was a lot to absorb between mouthfuls. In order of his interest, ‘Notter learned that 1) the pointy thing was called a ‘triangle’ and 2) it was now on its way to the bridge in Conscience-Berg that was least accessible to otters. It was true that like every other bridge it spanned a river that helped comprise the great waterway in which otters could freely travel from the confluence in the bay around the entirety of Conscience-Berg. It was also true that no otter had actually seen the bridge except from an incredibly

great distance. The Bridge of Elder-worth was built high up in the canyon-lands, with the bridgehead on a mesa.

The mesa itself had, with eons of erosion, acquired the shape of a castle tower, complete with parapets and cinder-colored creneaux and even rock formations that might have passed for gargoyles shaped from native stone. It held such fascination for those pilgrims and wayfarers whose chief aim was to cross Elderworth Bridge that many tarried and admired the keep and the throne room and fancied themselves royals.

Ah, but to reach the mesa from the canyon floor—that was no mean feat even for human beings, let alone otters.



### *Switch-backs*

‘Notter had heard from Otello accounts of the latter’s explorations ‘in the younger day’ that the river made its course in leisurely loops across the canyon floor. The predominant hues of the surrounding rocky terrain were greys and oranges and reds, relieved once in a while by a cholla or a cactus or, at the river’s margin, a willow or a cottonwood. The trail Hieu and Xuan would be obliged to follow would bring them by turns and twists back to the river, where ‘Notter could intercept them.

That task was fairly readily accomplished although Hieu (and Xuan trailing at a distance) had acquired a respectable head start, such that ‘Notter needed to adopt his most powerful stroke and his most strenuous pace in order to narrow the gap. His efforts left him panting on the bank and on the brink of nausea. Gradually he began to feel he could regulate his breathing. However, he made one particularly deep inhalation that inadvertently carried a bit of airborne cottonwood fluff into his upper respiratory passages. This incited a fit of coughing. Hieu, who had been approaching along the trail, stopped to ascertain the source of the sound. Just as his scanning eyes might have located ‘Notter in the midst of spasmodic choking and wheezing, he was distracted by the

diminutive human shape coming up the trail behind. For the first time, Hieu became aware that Xuan was following. Simultaneously, aware his progress after his father was no longer concealed, Xuan also halted, perhaps expecting a new tirade about a son's disobedience to soon reach his ear. But Hieu simply, resignedly nodded, acknowledging the fact of his son's presence and then returned his attention to the trail.

'Notter meanwhile had composed his breathing, nonetheless vexed by all the cottonwood tufts that had adhered to his wet fur while he was incapacitated. He blew away the last one with as perfect an expression of disgust and frustration as an otter can muster. He looked up to the switchback where Hieu had attained the top segment of the 'z' shape while Xuan was on the bottom. At this point Hieu conveyed the impression he was full of vim and vigor while Xuan's body habitus bespoke only weary uncertainty.

'Notter registered the difference in aspect between father and son without further reflection. He had other concerns. "Now it becomes tricky for an otter—what do I think I'm doing? An arduous ascent as far as I can see. I do not know what might await and there is no recourse to a waterway."

'Notter thought of his father waxing eloquent, " Surely, this is another 'misadventur'd piteous overthrow' in the making. Ah well—it is the still the demand of the hour."

At length, the unlikely and strung-out expedition of two humans and one otter came into an eldritch place of sandy mounds that gave way to fanciful red rock formations: great hobgoblins of rock mustered together like a crowd in Times Square on New Year's Eve. This one with a bishop's mitered hat, that one with a balding pate. Over there an assembly of figures like the pawns captured in a game of chess. They were altogether silent and motionless, some aloof and regal, some frozen in vague mockery of mortal folk. Hieu and Xuan did not stop to marvel. 'Notter, however was near to panic, anticipating the giants could anytime return to life in what would have to be an altogether famished state, considering their last meal would have been eons ago. Or



else the magic of the place would make of him the first otter shaped hoodoo. “ I assure you I would not be very impressive in size,” he said to a nearby hoodoo whose shape reminded ‘Notter of the Under-toad.

‘Notter sustained the difficult pace set by Xuan before him. Mercifully for the little otter, Xuan’s speed diminished as he lessened the distance between himself and his father. Hieu at first tried to ignore the presence of his son, but progressed to grudging acceptance of Xuan’s closer proximity. Still there had been no exchange of words between them. On a particularly steep gradient, Hieu’s breathing became rapid and labored from his exertions. He tired and stumbled. He lost hold of the bundled triangle. It tumbled out of its linen wrap and slid down the slope, towards Xuan. A gust of hot air caught hold of the linen and, in carefree fashion, wore it for a scarf high above the canyon floor. Hieu gasped but made no immediate move to retrieve the triangle. Xuan hesitated only a moment before allowing himself to slip and fall along the obvious short cut down the switchback, captured the triangle before it could further descend the slippery slope and lifted it from the dirt. He pulled off his shirt, with which he wiped the triangle clean and then re-wrapped it. Hieu considered Xuan, now shirtless in the afternoon sun, and nodded in recognition before resuming his way.

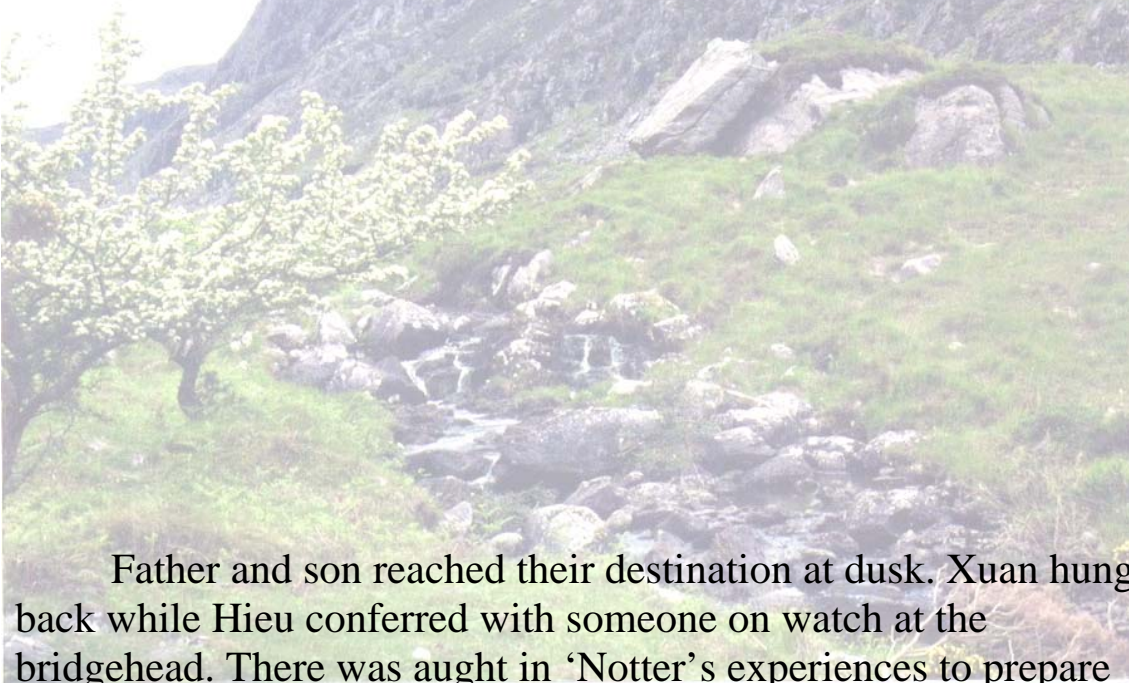
If his sister, Otterina, was relatively weak in human languages and ‘Notter in plane geometry, both had had considerable exposure to stories from world religions. This was chiefly through the efforts of their mother, Dottie. The image before him now, of Hieu leading by several paces and Xuan struggling with the bundled triangle behind, put ‘Notter in mind of another father and son pair. Dottie had related this particular story to the otter children with great reluctance and, at turns in her narration, even visible distress, conveying *fear and trembling*, as someone else contemplating the same story had once put it. Dottie’s extreme discomfort in telling the story of Abraham and Isaac was because she could not accept that Abraham’s obedience to a perceived command from God to sacrifice Isaac was in any

way virtuous or good. *Religious horror*, it had been called. Dottie's every inclination was to repudiate Abraham's obedience as against--if not all forms of nature-- then against moral nature.

'Notter shuddered at his recollection of the story. He nonetheless allowed the context of the Abraham and Isaac motif to momentarily shape his theory of minds with respect to the couple ahead of him. How like the ascent of Abraham and Isaac up Mount Moriah was Hieu and Xuan's progress towards the Bridge of Elder-worth. His earlier hypothesis that the triangle was used to open abalone shells returned to him full force. But now he wondered if like the young Isaac before him, Xuan was being obliged to carry an instrument of his own destruction. Then he wondered whether Han was peering out of a window at home asking herself who was being sacrificed for whom today.

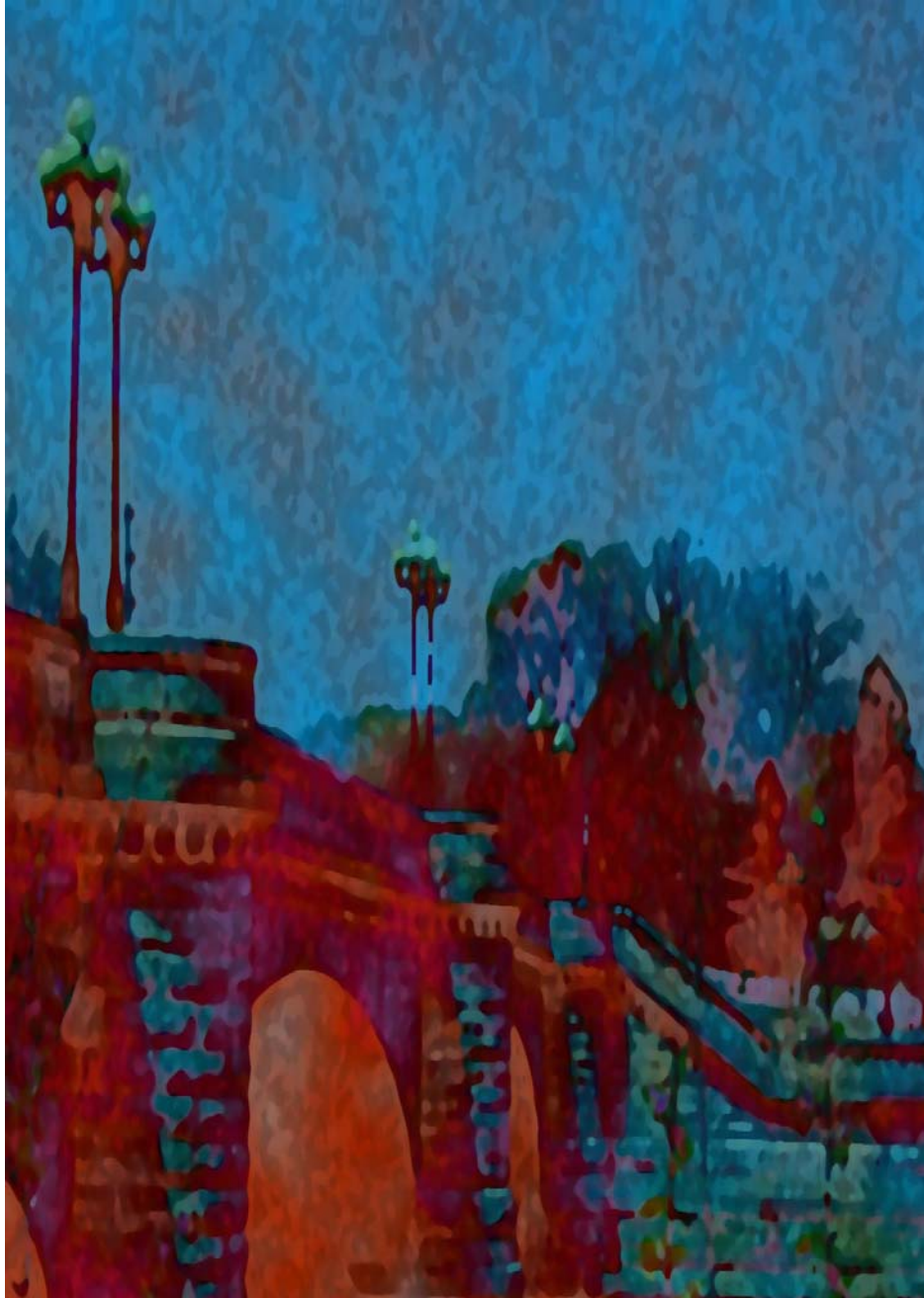
What was happening on the trail, however, suggested more mutuality in whatever sacrifice would be required. While 'Notter had been wondering, Xuan and Hieu had drawn closer together. Hieu had signaled Xuan to stop, motioned for him to hand over the triangle bundled in Xuan's shirt, which Hieu quickly but carefully laid aside. He then motioned his son to turn around. 'Notter tensed as Xuan complied. 'Notter hoped Xuan would now return home so that he would no longer aggravate his father. But in the very next moment Hieu was roughly bidding Xuan to squat. Hieu removed his backpack, rummaged on the bottom and pulled something out. A bottle of lotion, balm and unguent that, ever since their boat journey when each had been so badly burned, Han had insisted Hieu carry with him whenever he was unprotected in the sun. Hieu stepped round and poured a liberal amount of the contents of the bottle into Xuan's cupped hands and then more into his own which he smoothed over his palms and applied to Xuan's exposed back. The pair eventually arose, started out again, began to coordinate their pace and, at length and literally by turns (upon the many switchbacks left to be negotiated), engaged in awkward exchanges. Some were in their native tongue and some were in one or another of their adopted tongues, but all were conducted beyond 'Notter's

earshot. Still 'Notter could discern the patterns of the nonverbal aspects of their communication: expressions of frustration and affection, statements of purposes seeming at antipodes with one another, efforts to understand, eventually gratitude and forgiveness and tentative resolution. While intrigued by this process, 'Notter was constantly reminded of his own dangerously dehydrated state and was overjoyed to hear, as faint as could be and still be detected, a trickling sound. He followed the sound and found, amid an outcropping of rock, surrounded by verdure, what appeared to be an evanescent spring concealed from passers-by and yet only a stone's throw from the trail.



Father and son reached their destination at dusk. Xuan hung back while Hieu conferred with someone on watch at the bridgehead. There was aught in 'Notter's experiences to prepare him for the surrounding heights briefly defined by the afterglow of a sunken sun, nor the advancing shadows incorporating already tenebrous shapes into monistic canyon depths. The Bridge of Elder-worth was a commanding presence, inspiring awe if not fear and trembling, impressing an image so deeply upon 'Notter's retina it would appear ever after in his dreams. It was a bridge of living rock arching and zigzagging across the chasm below, visiting destinations determined solely by the opportune presence of rock formations, jutting cliffs and mesas. 'Notter could not help but be drawn into the presence of ineffable, disturbing beauty.

‘Notter knew that the span of this bridge was legendary in magnitude. Hieu and his son had arrived. Already they had started across it. To ‘Notter, their journey seemed far from over. Yet he was loath to follow any longer. He had never been so far off the ground. His beloved river had never been so far below.



For a while, 'Notter was content to watch from the shadows as father and son made steady progress along the bridge. They eventually arrived at an imposing structure in the center of the bridge. It was not quite spiral, having much sharper contours. It seemed familiar somehow. 'Notter's muscle memory was suddenly stirred and he recognized the pattern of switchbacks that enabled their ascent. 'Notter further observed that the structure was actually an array comprised of countless triangles of authority of diverse sizes and angulations, but each shape conferring the most generous apportionment of degree to the angles marked 'A'. The triangle that Hieu and Xuan had each in turn carried to the Bridge of Elderworth might have its niche in the vast array, but it would take them a long while to find just where. " So the pointy thing rescued from the bay will finally have a home. It is time I made for my own home. I have more than enough to tell my sister about the mystery of the triangle."

What 'Notter did not know, as he commenced his return journey was the legend. It was said that if the Triangles of Authority were fully and properly arrayed upon the Bridge of Elderworth and the first was struck but one time, that the resonance created would make an echoing journey across the canyon. Eventually the sound would strike the bedrock laid down at the same era persons of conscience first determined to pass values on to succeeding generations. The bedrock it was said, would not respond with an echo but with a new song in which the original resonance, while recognizable, would be transformed.

'Notter was ignorant of the legend. He would never surmise that Hieu and Xuan lingered long upon the bridge, each harboring hope that the triangle they had restored to its place would possess such instrumental value. Nor did he wonder what they expected when, together, they found a metal wand to strike their triangle a single time. Truth be told, Hieu and Xuan imagined many things in consequence of their act: a sudden swell of music in a grand theme, a symphonic-like reworking of folk songs, a fusion of styles or perhaps simply an eloquent silence. They were open to the

possibilities. ‘Notter knew none of their private thoughts. Still, ‘Notter did not dismiss what he heard as just another illusion drawn from among the canyon’s many. He heard the sounds quite distinctly, each time the canyon breeze prevailed in his direction: a dan ty ba against the rhythms of water lapping and wood being lovingly worked.



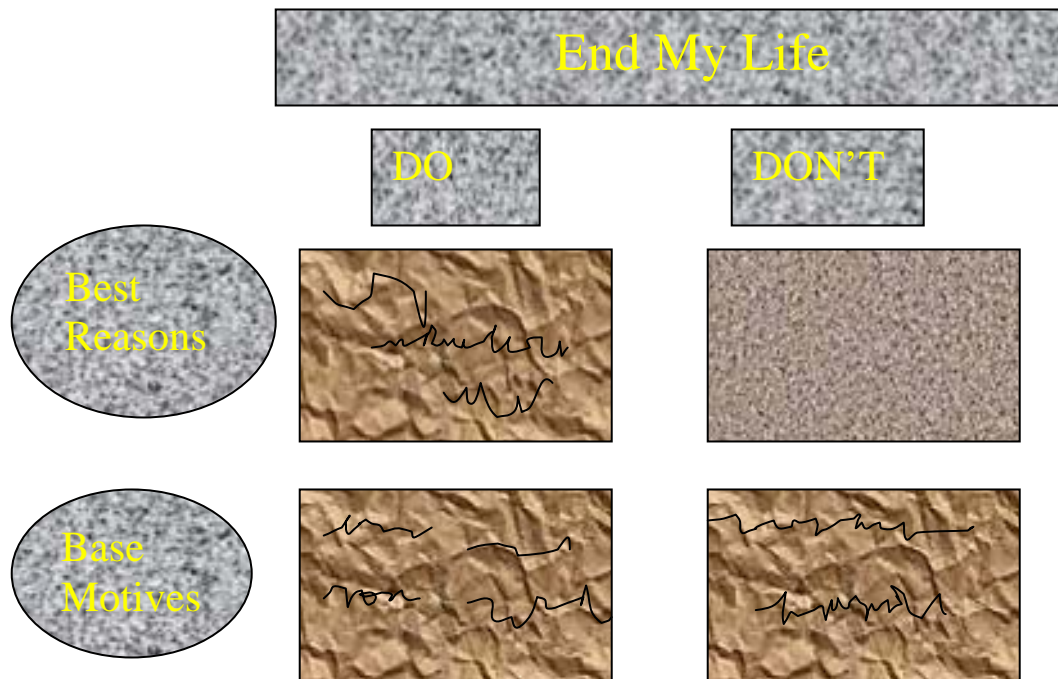


## Chapter Three: The Second Value Triangle





Otter peered out of her concealment to see what the Dweller had drawn with chalk on the flat stones. It looked like this:



“Round shapes that say ‘Best Reasons’ and ‘Base Motives.’ A long box shape that says ‘End My Life’. Smaller box shapes that say ‘DO’ and ‘DON’T’. Underneath, sand-filled boxes covered with pieces of old paper-bag full of squiggles on them. Curses. The squiggles are human cursive. I don’t know human cursive yet.” She was ashamed to have the additional thought that her brother ‘Notter had already learned a little about cursive when she had not wanted to bother. She wanted to shout aloud, “Hey, you there. I can’t read your abominable squiggles.” She didn’t. Instead she muttered, “Whatever,” and turned to go. But there was something oddly nagging about the pieces of paper-bag inscribed with the squiggly patterns. Each looked as if it had been crumpled and smoothed and crumpled and smoothed again. Moreover, they did not cover all of the boxes. “There is one box left uncovered,” Otter observed. It offended her sense of symmetry. “Probably ran out of paper-bags.” Still she waited to see if the Dweller would find at least a token piece of paper for the box in the upper right corner or else, failing that, make at least one squiggle in the sand itself. Otter

waited and waited but the Dweller made no move to put anything in the empty box. Instead, probably for the umpteenth time, the Dweller crumpled up the piece of paper in the box on the lower right side. The Dweller turned and walked to a pile of river-rocks not far removed from where pylons rooted the bridge deeply in the bank. From the river-rocks the Dweller selected several large and heavy stones, carried them back to the chalk and sand diagram and placed some in the top and some in the bottom boxes only on the DO side. Then the Dweller wrapped the rocks in each box with the corresponding piece of paper. "Paper covers rock. Scissors cuts paper. Rock smashes scissors...where are those scissors, anyway? Missing better than a week, I believe." The Dweller then randomly picked up one paper wrapped rock from the DO side and picked up the crumpled piece of paper from the DON'T side and gauged their relative weight. Once this task was accomplished, the Dweller reached into a pocket and pulled out a shiny object. The Dweller made it open with a click, regarded its contents, closed it and then cast it into the canal. Otter instantly roused and alerted to this, the Dweller's latest action. The otter's sudden movement, in turn, revealed her presence. The startled Dweller exclaimed: "What's this?" Without further hesitation, Otter scrambled down the bank and dove headlong into the water.

She broke the surface, lolled a moment on her back in the sunshine, the shiny prize between her paws. The Dweller advanced cautiously to the edge of the canal, bent down and queried the otter, "Well then?" Otter met the Dweller's gaze with her own. The Dweller said levelly, "I suppose you think its finders-keepers." Otter rolled and dove again. It was awhile before she re-emerged. When at last she did, Otter had a stone expertly lodged upon her chest. She began tapping the shiny object.

"Now none of that!" the Dweller said rising up suddenly and pointing to the object only moments ago discarded. It was Otter's turn to be startled. She ceased her tapping and back-paddled away from the looming figure. But she discerned no menace. The

Dweller seemed, for the moment, rather like someone overmastered by puzzlement or wonder. The moment hung suspended in time, the other side of an eternity. Of course, as moments must, it dissolved inevitably into the next moment waiting for its turn to come to life. In the moments thereafter, the Dweller seemed in a weakened state and slumped down unsteadily on the bank, head gravitating down to upraised knees. Otter tentatively resumed tapping, an eye ever on the Dweller's figure, now compressed and self-enfolded. In this newly adopted form, the Dweller emitted a concise groan, and then began rocking back and forth to the durable rhythm of Otter's tapping.

Her tapping stopped long before the Dweller's rocking. The Dweller came late to an awareness of the stillness and marked it with a panicked gasp. "Where are you, otter? Are you gone?" The Dweller completed a scan of the surrounds with new despondence, a sense of loss keener than expected. Then, at the edge of the Dweller's visual field, there came a glint and a longer gleaming. The Dweller turned tentatively in its direction. It came from the chalk diagram, from the upper right hand corner, which bore the message 'DON'T' and professed to provide The Very Best Reason. An illumination captured from the setting sun beckoned to the Dweller. While appearing singular to the Dweller's eye, the gleaming actually came from two objects. The Dweller picked the recognizable one up first, brushed away the water drops still clinging to its exterior, opened it with a click, regarded its contents, closed it and nested it in the pocket most accustomed to its shape. The second object, which had been placed to frame the first was a scalene triangle with three letters, one, a 'P', writ large.

" 'P' for 'Peer', 'P' for 'Progeny'. " The Dweller murmured, recognizing the triangle immediately as a component of le Pont de l' Autre. "I have noticed your absence. I know where you belong." The bridge had after all become the Dweller's home and its merits and defects had become most familiar. There was a part of the masonry that formed a corbelled half-arch and could be clambered

up like a giant's staircase from the breakwater. At nearly every level, of which there were five, there was a triangle, shaped somewhat like the one the Dweller carried but recessed into the masonry. As the eye progressed upward by the stages defined by each corbel, the appropriate triangle's angle marked 'P' was apportioned more degrees, seemingly at the expense of the angle marked 'A'. As any school age child in Conscience-berg knew full well, this signified the developmental process in which, over time, authority-derived values gave way to make room for the values that emerged in the give and take of peer relations. At the base the 'P' angle was most narrow. This corresponded to the time in life, a stage of reliance upon parenting, when daily routines, do's and don'ts are in abundance from authority figures and govern peer-centered activities, promoting sharing and taking turns and modeling conflict resolution. The 'S' angle was also not very full-bodied, including within its compass, strivings toward pleasure in a zone of safety. One step up, a new stage of awareness--of brain and mind and of the heart, the 'A' angle is narrowed because the 'S' angle enjoys enlargement with many of the values originating from authorities. The 'P' angle widens as there is more and more opportunity to put peer regarding values into practice and to refine them according to peer-derived values. Another step up, onto the stage of personification, of awareness of moral personhood, a realization that rules are embedded in the context of relations in which trust becomes pre-eminent, cooperation and reciprocity are valued in word and deed and the thought that is first given in deliberate choosing becomes a source of pride. Yet another step--this triangle pulsed with internal activity. The triangular boundaries remained stationary but inside the symbols 'A' and 'P' switched places with one another. Occasionally 'S' would enlarge momentarily only for its angle to subside again surrendering substance not quite consolidated to its complements.

From the Dweller there was a bitter if cryptic commentary:

“What else would you expect? For what purpose? By all accounts, one’s elders die off and one is left more and more with only one’s peers--- or one’s progeny.”

Whatever may have been the Dweller’s adversities, rejections perceived and real, loss or losses, they were sufficient to make retrieval of life affirming values a very, very difficult thing. In the Dweller’s case, the only one immediately within reach was ‘do no further harm to persons who care about you.’ “It took that little otter to remind me,” crossed the Dweller’s mind. In the Dweller’s case, it had been enough to begin driving back the dark thoughts and urges that had descended earlier.

The Dweller continued the ascent of the bridge. The uppermost level represented in the stone work corresponded to a level of freedom upon which might emerge acknowledgment of community-- of peers and progeny and elders, too, who eventually require more care-giving than compliance with erstwhile authority. However, there was only a hollow where a triangle had once been. This was the niche for the triangle that the Dweller carried up from the riverbank; the same one Otterina had left on the value matrix sketched in chalk. “Such a simple task of restoration, yet I have found this simplest of tasks so very hard to accomplish.” the Dweller looked about as if to see if the otter from the river would witness and validate the action. There was no sign of her. The Dweller returned the triangle to its home. The Dweller descended the arch, then scanned the nearby path and found fresh and distinctive tracks that could be followed even in the gloaming. There were three sets of tracks, laid out as if two makers were in pursuit of the third.



### *Rendezvous with an otter*

“Go on, Chammy. You were not descended from pirates,” Jenny looked up from the smoldering kindling, which she had been toiling, in vain, to re-ignite.

It's pronounced 'Sha-mwa' her companion uttered like an oath under his breath.

"Chamois—Chammy, what's the difference, hey which pirate do you claim to come from?"

"Lafitte."

"La-feet? Oh, the one who helped George Washington?"

"You are thinking of Lafayette in the American Revolutionary War."

"Right. Him."

"Jean Lafitte. A famous pirate. He did help General Andrew Jackson before he became president."

"Who?"

"In a battle at New Orleans---in the War of 1812."

"And he was a pirate? Cool.... I would make a pretty good pirate, I think—like in the song about Pirate Jenny, "My crew would come to me with the prisoners we'd captured and ask (she intoned this ominously) 'Do we kill them now or later?'" Jenny paused and glanced at Otterina in the cage, and said—in tones rather too soft to be in the least bit convincingly piratical, "Well, Chamois—do you.... I mean do we do it now or later?"

Jenny had hooked up with Chamois while both had been "on the outs" as she put it. What she meant was that they had been on the run. Jenny had been "on the outs", on the outside looking in, many time before. She was first on the outs from her original family home, and then she was on the outs from the Guardian's Home, two therapeutic foster homes and a group home. Now, for the time being, she was on the outs relative to the juvenile correctional facility to which she had been ordered by the court should her placement in the group home fail. She had tried to go along with all the rules and expectations there but it proved to be very hard for her. Harder still were the therapies in which others were struggling to deal with the maltreatment they had endured. She definitely did not want to go into that stuff, ever. So she opted to be on the outs again.



Chamois was older but had not a single out of home placement. However, his number of in- and out-of-school suspensions far exceeded Jenny's. He garnered the suspensions for tardiness and truancy, and for fighting. His expulsion was for carrying a weapon to school. He didn't consider it to be much of a weapon—it was his aunt's darning needle-- but felt he needed something that morning for protection from his peers. After his expulsion, his peers made such fun of his choice of weapons, he could not bear the humiliation. He decided to exercise the prerogatives of coming of age and dropped out of school altogether. He was eventually asked to leave his home because he wasn't attending school, he couldn't seem to hold a job and he was violating curfew. His idea was to live "out on the land" and maybe make some money by trapping animals belonging to protected species. He had acquired this idea when he had encountered some "militia" who were spending a week of their vacation time "in training." There were half a dozen gathered around a cooler during a break, having beer together, cleaning their rifles and bemoaning further restrictions on owning and using weapons. They did not notice Chamois until he was almost among them. Then, among the six soldiers on maneuvers, there ensued an embarrassed scramble for mastery of the situation, concealment of the alcohol and resumption of what they imagined were effective military manners. It was not like any of the in-school suspensions he had had. Chamois was blindfolded, his hands were tied and he was roughly guided through a thicket or two (it may have been the same thicket twice over) to a tent. There the leader of the group, referred to as the Cap'n conducted the interrogation. Unfortunately for Chamois, no sooner had he spoken his name than the sound of it seemed to indispose the leader. "French, huh? *Parlay-voo* American?" Chamois told of his origins, the subtleties of which were roundly ignored by the Cap'n. "Which side are you people on, anyway?" The militia members who had gathered about murmured approval of their leader's firm, confrontative approach. Truth be told, however, his demeanor betokened an odd mix of paranoia and

solicitation. He apparently wanted to do justice to his companions' confidence in his leadership by ensuring to everyone's satisfaction that Chamois was not engaged in espionage. Or, if Chamois was so engaged, by doing what would be necessary, not otherwise specified to any but his innermost circle of followers. On the other hand, he wanted to persuade his captive of the crucial importance of what he and his paramilitary companions were trying to accomplish.

Cap'n had invested a long time and much energy in his 'regiment.' In his youth, he had begun with paint-guns and laser-tag and in later years, had tried re-enactments which took him all across the country. He had preferred the battle re-enactments but was eventually barred from participation at most venues because, contrary to actual outcomes recorded in history, he would insist on winning battles for the side embracing the lost causes he most admired. By default he became more involved in "ron-dee-voo" re-enactments, usually as a mountain-man who brought trappings to trade. However he managed to nurture burning passion for certain among the causes lost upon the battlefields he had visited and the determination to present himself a living reproach to those opposing the values he extracted from what he considered very moving experiences. The values he espoused more and more openly over time tended towards self-aggrandizement. There was, in the mix, a failure to recognize personhood, even as a developmental potential, in others he identified according to several demographic variables. All of this could be adduced as evidence of progressive constriction in the ambit of his conscience. His moral imagination, while it still could be called moral, became a more difficult place for him to visit, its only access concealed in a house of mirrors. Eventually, there were precious few human beings he perceived as meriting his time and effort. Several of these he found among the spectators and hangers-on at ron-dee-voo's he helped re-enact but only a few became more or less trusted lieutenants in the militia he later organized.

Cap'n presumed to regale new recruits after officiating over their daylong hazing and tests of strength and courage with stories of the by-gone days of his ron-dee-voo re-enactments. His lieutenants who had 'known him when' were on hand to validate the tales and would nod appreciatively when he included one or another of them in his account. As for his animal pelts, he may or may not have exaggerated the money he was offered for them. Who can tell of such things? He probably did exaggerate his cleverness in outwitting various and sundry park rangers suspicious of possible poaching and illegal harvesting of protected species.

It was from the Cap'n who detained him as a 'respected guest' that Chamois first had the idea of trying his own hand at the fur-trade. In fact, the Cap'n had given Chamois his first commission, a burlap bag, an old cage and a Bowie knife so sharp that no one at school could doubt it made a formidable weapon.



Chamois was trying to ignore Pirate Jenny who had now donned an eye-patch, a bandanna and a sash. She had fashioned a ring out of a twist of metal she had pried off Otterina's cage and worked it through one of her body piercings that still remained patent. She hadn't meant for the metal to become jewelry when she pried it off the cage. It had a wicked point that stuck into the interior at a bad angle. Jenny was alarmed because Otterina was still frantically trying to escape and might do herself serious harm. Jenny herself had had sharps confiscated when she was confined. And though she never expressed it to the persons responsible for her safety, occasionally she experienced gratitude not to have had any sharps handy when she most desperately wanted them. Her efforts to work the metal piece back and forth until it broke away aroused Chamois' curiosity. Transforming the prong into an adornment coupled with "I dunno whaddya think?" was the best explanation she could conjure. Anyway, it seemed to satisfy Chamois who dismissed the subject by saying she was "just plain weird." He could not as effectively dismiss her flirtatious demonstrations of her pirate apparel.

"I'll bet we could make just as much selling her for a pet, Chamois."

"Not a chance. I told you what the militia guy was offering—besides I think it's kind of a test for me before I'm allowed to join."

"You mean like a gang initiation?"

"Yeah, something like that."

"What's so special about them? Are you sure you want to be in their gang—or any gang?"

"I don't know if I want to be yet, but I would like to be asked."

"I don't think you know what you're in for. Believe me I can tell you about gangs."

"So have you been in one?"

“Not exactly in one— Look why don’t we just hang together awhile? We don’t need no gang. I’m really good at shoplifting. Want to share a blunt?”

“No. I don’t know. Maybe afterwards.”

She looked at Otterina.

“Whatever.”

“How come you smoke?”

“Makes me feel better, I guess.”

Neither Chamois nor Jenny expected to have a conversation about their moral lives at that point. And probably they would not have described it as such. Still, it was a conversation between two persons of conscience. He wanted to know about her do’s and don’ts with respect to substances, her best reasons and base motives for and against running away, for and against stealing. She wanted to learn more about his passion for weapons and his do’s and don’ts about using them while fighting. He disclosed more than was his custom about experiences of being bullied, of having his life threatened and how he had adopted values to stand up for himself and to become more independent. She disclosed more than she ever had about how her maltreatment experiences affected her and who had become her principal moral attachment figures (one was on the custodial staff at a residential home). They touched upon values about sexuality, do’s and don’ts each professed to have as a sexual being. They were more shy about the subject of right and wrong ways of dealing with aching loneliness. They decided to put off decisions about the otter until morning.



The Dweller came upon their camp just before dawn, reconnoitered, noted Chamois and Jenny asleep in one another’s arms near the smoking remains of their fire and proceeded silently to the cage containing Otterina. The Dweller whispered, “So here you are, little otter, incarcerated, I think, and missing your freedom. The strangest thing happened. I had lost your trail when

there was a splash made by some amazing creature in the water. It was much larger than you. I could not make anything out but a gliding shape. I followed it until it submerged again. Then I found your trail. ”

No sooner was Otterina set free then she made her way to the water’s edge faster than the Dweller anticipated. The splash awakened Jenny, who screamed. Chamois was now on alert and grabbed his knife to ward away the intruder. Only minutes later—though it did not seem so short a time to anyone involved—a park ranger arrived, and insisted Chamois surrender the weapon. Chamois obliged the ranger despite his perception of a size and strength differential overwhelmingly in his favor. Chamois, Jenny and the Dweller sneaked occasional peeks at one another as the park ranger began her inquiries of the three young persons she’d found on the outs.





## Chapter Four: The Third Triangle

Her thoughts came all in a rush and a jumble.

“So ‘Notter had led the Dweller to my cage.

“Thank-goodness for my brother. How did he know? And where is he now?

“What has he learned about the pointy things?

“I have failed. I can tell him nothing. I was too busy running away from humans to see what the Dweller did with the object. But it had to do with the bridge.

Once she decided what she would do, Otterina’s thought processes decelerated to a normal pace. Question marks were replaced by goal directed patterns of thought and actions. She returned to Le Pont de L’Autre, scanned the surrounds for her brother, retrieved the third triangle and propelled herself downstream. Passing under the bridge of Other-Worth she espied the pointy thing the Dweller had replaced in its niche.

“There is one left for me to figure out and by which I can redeem myself. I know the bridge where it must go.”



On her way, she engaged in reflection. To her credit she did not permit herself to ruminate upon her recent endangerment or to indulge disgust with herself for having been snared and requiring others to come to her rescue. However, not altogether to her discredit, she did allow herself a few self-recriminations for how she customarily treated her brother. It was a deliberate and perhaps even a relentless journey in which she was oblivious to the usually permissible distractions of light and sound and playful breeze—that is, until she heard the terrible grating and groaning coming from somewhere further downstream. The exact source of the noise was concealed by several bends in the waterway she had yet to negotiate. In response to it, Otterina could not now disallow the dread that beset her.

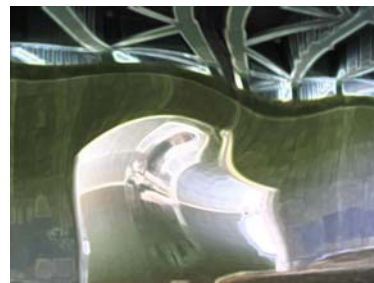
Otterina came upon the source of both the sound and her sense of dread and foreboding. She stopped. She back-paddled. She turned away. Then she summoned her will power and forced herself to look until what she beheld was fully recognized and appreciated.

How perilous had become the circumstances of her favorite bridge, the Bridge of Self-Worth. It was well known that the bridge's most essential feature was its constant state of incompleteness, its requirement for development and for maintenance. Yet because of this essential feature, it had been possible for Otterina to spend an inordinate amount of her time fantasizing how it might finally appear after all was said and done. She imagined the most majestic form that a bridge might assume against the horizon, with arches, catenaries, and even spires all contributing to the unparalleled impression the super structure would make upon the eye. It would be a wonder to behold, a jewel among the bridges of Conscience-Berg. Its exemplary architecture would be much admired, imaged in all manner of media, and of course, an object of continuous study. The bridge itself would become an esteemed work of art to be preserved by experts and safeguarded by docents from the quotidian reality and the traffic of ordinary conveyances. The bridge would be a sight to behold, a destination at which a steady stream of travelers--she dared to think even an occasional poet upon a pilgrimage—arrived to pay homage. Not a bridge made for crossing at all but rather to revolve about with deep appreciation. There would be festivals allowed, of course, perhaps one to celebrate the bridge in every season.

In her visions of Self-Worth she had not given much thought to the underside of things, to the humbler, structural elements ensuring stability. So she was shocked when she rounded a bend in the river to see the bridge in a state of agonized flux, engaged in such exaggerated serpentine motions the like of which she had thought only an otter who had eaten spoiled abalone capable. She bordered upon complete despair when she came close enough to recognize the metallic keening she had puzzled about on her

journey. A deep groan accompanied each stressed undulation of her favorite bridge.

“It’s insupportable,” Otterina cried out involuntarily. All thought of aesthetics fled from consideration as she saw the real possibility of the structural demise and eventual collapse of her beloved bridge.



She was not so overwhelmed by her horror, however, that she failed to see how the triangle she had struggled to bring so far could be positioned in a way such as she had seen at The Bridge of Other-Worth. But it would have to be done precisely and at just the right moment, when the bridge was midway in oscillation. “ Yet how can this be sufficient to brace the entire structure?” She countered her despondent thought with the image of The Dweller under that Other Bridge. There she witnessed him finding against all expectations, a gain in loss, an expression of gratitude, an acceptance of forgiveness and a recovery of life-affirming value.

She had arrived at the site under the bridge she deemed most critical. Only from that vantage point did her personal danger from the concrete and steel in ever more unrestrained motion above her head become apparent. Concrete chunks and metal bits began to rain down around her like a meteor shower. Aside from the personal danger involved, securing the triangle in the proper place would be exacting and effortful beyond any task she had so far undertaken. She experienced a surge of courage and pride: it would be the accomplishment of a lifetime, worthy of song. She turned and dived to retrieve the triangle from where it rested. The sediment of the river bottom, agitated by the debris cast off in the bridge’s torments boiled up in clouds impenetrable to her vision.

She blindly extended her paws. For a brief moment she thought she had the triangle, but a sudden lurch of the bridge set forth a tremor that caused it to slip once more beyond her grasp. She groped frantically along the river bottom threatened by unfamiliar currents. Over-exhaustion of air-supply obliged her to surface. She gulped an inadequate breath and resumed her search. She was, at last, able to locate the triangle. It would not move readily. She leveraged her weight against the rubble that was steadily collecting around her. She felt the triangle begin to budge. "Yes!" she thought triumphantly—just as a massive stone block, dislodged from the crumbling bridgework above, forcibly descended, as if determined to crush the very life from her.



While spared death by immediate crushing or more agonizing compression, Otterina found the prospect of drowning no more desirable. She bravely struggled to liberate her body from under the stone that pinned her down. In the few moments of good air remaining to her, she did very well indeed by digging down, burrowing and wriggling part way out. She might even have been congratulated as having done exceptionally well except the stone would not yield her hind leg. "This is what it must have been like. This is how it was for otters in the old time--to be caught by the teeth-in jaws-without-bodies." As if from a distance, she made this observation, closed her eyes and allowed the last bubbles of air to escape her lungs.

Someone's muzzle was most insistently pressed against her face. Otterina involuntarily opened her eyes. It was her brother. He was trying to arouse her, darting to and from the surface with helpings of air for her who so recently resigned to be without air ever again. Then he was a blur darting behind her to the very edge of her visual field. Then he was pressed against the stone, laboring mightily to push it off his sister. It was her brother, 'Notter, and he seemed to her more determined and confident than he had ever

seemed before. How proud he made her. But her pride turned soon enough to alarm. ‘Notter would soon enough exhaust himself in so much disfavored effort, and then he would surely drown along with her. And that could not be allowed. She took hold of him as he shared with her another breath. She looked at him steadily and shook her head to dissuade him.

His look was all incomprehension. “Why does she detain me now? Does she not know the urgency of my mission?” he might have thought. He attempted to break free, to be on his way to secure more air for her from a surface not so very far up, where the precious stuff was in abundance beyond imagining. Didn’t his sister know that only several otter lengths up there was air in such quantity that the paltry amounts he pilfered for her would never be missed? Still Otterina’s gaze prevailed, for a moment of uttermost importance, in countering his departure to resume what must, he realized, seem to her a futile circle of errands. Her gaze furthermore conveyed that she meant him to attend to something else. She pointed to the triangle and pointed to her beloved bridge above them. He understood her intentions for him: to abandon her and to make the repairs she herself had failed to make. He shook his head, ‘NO!’ and broke away from her. He could not trade her for the meaning she wished to have composed from her life. Indecision and weariness gripped him: to the surface or to the stone? He looked again at his sister whose gaze had not wavered. She did not point imperiously but sustained instead a palm up gesture, gently modulated by the current, which presented the triangle, an ostensible definition of her hope that her brother would divert his efforts to save her, and make meaning for her by ensuring his own survival. She closed her eyes again. ‘Notter could no longer refuse her. He turned towards the triangle.

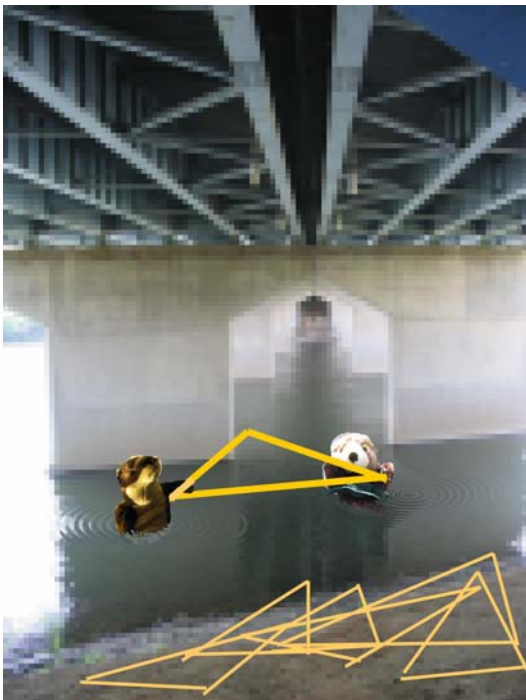
The triangle! Yes! It was exactly the thing he needed—if only he weren’t too late in realizing it. He seized its apex and summoned his remaining strength to pull it apart. “It is hollow like the other triangle was. Hollow--just like a reed!” Then he quickly bent it to the purpose---a breathing tube for his sister.

It was not long after that the groaning of the bridge above reached a crescendo, deafening even under water. At the same moment an immense shadow fell over 'Notter trying to steady the makeshift snorkel and urging Otterina to remain conscious and breathe. He was sure in his mind the bridge had now shifted irreconcilably from its foundations and that its collapse was imminent. He anticipated the massive structure to lay claim to the space he and his sister occupied. He was just as sure in his heart that, come what may, he must remain with her. The shadow deepened, and then engulfed them. However, the groaning had stopped. He looked fearfully upwards towards the surface. The expression of fear on his face was rapidly converted to one of great surprise.



“Sister, help me. I cannot manage these triangles alone.” She was sprawled upon the riverbank. Otter could hear her own groan as she explored her head for the lump she knew would be there.

“ ‘Notter, didn’t I tell you I must do this myself ?”



“ It is not ‘Must Myself’,” an impatient, but measured, voice responded. “It is the Bridge of Self-Worth that needs you both to survive.”

What Otter saw utterly astonished her. The Under-toad was bracing the bridge by dint of sheer strength giving the otters an opportunity to position the triangle. With considerable difficulty they accomplished the task.



“Did you say ‘triangles,’ ‘Notter?’”

“The Under-toad carried most of them. He said they belong here.”

Together they chose where the remaining triangles would provide the optimal support. They chose wisely. They became so fully engaged in the process, they failed to notice when the Under-toad let go of the bridge and left them to their own devices.



Of course, ever after, the Under-toad kept an eye on the otters. He did not always allow them to retrieve triangles fallen from the bridges without considerable effort. Sometimes he even conjured up stormy weather from beyond the bay area to test the tensile strength and the flexibility of the triangles that buttressed The Bridge of Self-Worth (and all of the other bridges in Conscience-berg as well). For the most part the Under-toad refrained from launching anything as powerful as a tsunami. Still Otterina and her brother found the bridges to require faithful maintenance and sustained reparative efforts. Otterina gradually let fade her dream of spires, towers and catenaries atop the Bridge of Self-Worth.

The efforts of the otters drew the attention of some other denizens and citizens of Conscience-Berg. Otterina was surprised by the re-appearance of The Dweller. The Dweller came with a boat and paints and brushes. So began an ambitious project of painting the concrete pylons that under-gird Otterina's favorite bridge. The Dweller seemed –but probably only seemed—not to notice the otter pair swimming about while the work was in progress. When they were eventually completed, the murals depicted scenes pleasing to Otterina's eye. The theme was kelp forests and, she fancied, abalone beds, as well.

On warm summer evenings, international folk musicians, both amateur and professional, would gather round the site and play for whoever cared to listen. On a return visit to Conscience-berg, after spending a few years in the country of his parents' origin, Xuan came to one of these gatherings. He brought the *dantya ba* he had crafted himself and played under the bridge in a spot specially selected to achieve an elegant resonance of rippling notes. The audience, which included the otter pair, was delighted. After the concert, the otters were last to depart, unobserved, with neat dives that left behind their own ripple effects.

